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Facilitating educated talk in a foreign language classroom

Abstract

The paper looks at how the concept of classroom knowledge and the concept of mutually constructed discourse have been investigated in both L1 and FL/L2 classroom research. First, the qualities of educated discourse are discussed and the main approaches to exploring classroom talk explained. Then, a selection of L1 and FL/L2 studies is presented with the main focus put on interaction patterns and classroom practices that have proved successful in facilitating educated talk in the classroom. The paper winds up with didactic implications concerning teaching educated talk as well as suggestions for future research.

1. Qualities of educated discourse

The socio-cultural perspective on classroom language learning emphasises the role of language in constructing common knowledge and understanding. Educational discourse, i.e. the discourse of teaching-and-learning in the classroom, should prepare learners to enter and participate in a wider out-of-school community, where educated talk is used (Mercer 1995). Facilitating educated talk, which is also called literate talk (Clegg 1992) or critical talk (Wallace 2005), should be one of the aims of teaching academic English (e.g. Wallace 2005; Johns 1997). By developing educated talk students prepare themselves "to get a foothold in new cognitive territory" (Clegg 1992: 17).

Educated discourse has specific features. Mercer (1995) claims that educated discourse is exploratory, i.e. critical but constructive. Speakers engage with each other's ideas, offering suggestions for joint considerations. When they challenge or counter-challenge their interlocutors, arguments are justified and alternative ideas presented. In exploratory talk "knowledge is made more publicly accountable and reasoning more visible in the talk" (Mercer 1995: 104). Clegg (1992) sees educated

talk as discourse similar to formal English used in public, rather than informal language used every day. This quality is also emphasised by Wallace (2005), who claims that by developing literate talk learners practise critical thinking. Wallace (2005: 77) explains that although literate talk is "not in itself necessarily critical," it can be a more suitable tool in discussions and critical analyses of texts than "day-to-day survival English." In her opinion critical talk and critical thinking are mutually supportive.

I believe that developing educated talk should be an important aim of teaching academic English (for a more thorough discussion of educated talk in an academic setting, see Kusiak forthcoming). It is worth emphasising that enhancing educated talk should be accompanied by developing critical thinking (see Kusiak, Bandura 2007).

2. Approaches to investigating classroom talk

Two approaches can be identified in studies examining classroom discourse: one that draws on an encoding-decoding model of communication and the other based on Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory (Bickhard 1992). A traditional conceptualisation of communication, based on an encoding-decoding model, has been found unsatisfactory in investigating foreign language discourse (e.g. Bickhard 1992). It is assumed to diminish the role of the listener and reduce investigation to mere counting of occurrences of certain communication gambits (e.g. Nunan 1992). What is neglected is this research perspective is the role of the language in how learners perform various language activities. It is the Vygotskian approach that creates an opportunity to explore the interplay between speaking and thinking as factors intertwining in language activities.

It seems that despite their weaknesses, the studies based on the traditional conceptualisation of communication have many advantages. Although the results of their "calculations" can be considered as incomplete (mainly due to "ignoring" the role of cognitive factors in classroom talk and their interaction with linguistic factors), they provide valuable information about a complex nature of classroom discourse, mainly patterns of interaction most common in foreign language classes as well as the roles taken by talk participants and communicative functions that speakers perform. This information can be very useful for foreign language teachers. It can develop teachers' understanding of classroom talk and raise their awareness of their role in constructing classroom discourse.

Below a selection of studies that have explored L1 and FL/L2 classroom discourse within the encoding-decoding framework is discussed. The main aim of this review is to present interaction patterns and classroom practices that proved conducive to developing quality talk in L1 and FL/L2 settings. In this discussion, the relationship between mutually constructed discourse and co-constructed knowledge is explained as well.

3. Interaction patterns facilitating educated talk – a review of L1 and FL/L2 studies

3.1. The IRE pattern

As mentioned earlier, many studies have been conducted to identify how classroom discourse is organised and what patterns are conducive to developing quality talk. Analyses of classroom discourse have revealed that the most common discourse pattern is the Initiation, Response, and Evaluation (IRE) pattern, where Initiation stands for the teacher initiating interaction, Response for a response produced by students and Evaluation for the teacher evaluating students' response. Its omnipresence in the classroom talk has encouraged researchers to reflect on the usefulness of this pattern. Below a short list of different voices about the IRE is presented (after Sheehy 2002: 287).

"Some consider the pattern hegemonic (Gutierrez 1995), overused (Lemke 1990), and a default pattern (Cazden 1988); however, others have shown the pattern to enable the construction of the desired knowledge to be learned through task-specific expansions (Heap 1988), the revoicing and reformulation of what is important in a specific discipline (O'Connor, Michaels 1993), and the validation of student response as well as the promotion of student-generated topics (Wells 1993)."

Research into classroom discourse has identified several variations of the IRE. Some findings are presented below.

3.2. The IRE I pattern (Hoey 1991)

Hoey (1991) noticed that the simple IRE pattern may become more complex. Speakers may show interest in their interlocutor's response to their initiations and extend their contribution. This complexity depends on the follow-up move; a negative follow-up may encourage the speaker to respond, thus changing this move into re-initiation, as shown below.

Initiation – Response – positive follow-up (end of exchange) OR
Initiation – Response – negative follow-up – Re-Initiation (exchange recycles)

3.3. The IRE / IR(E) pattern (Basturkmen 2002)

Basturkmen (2002) analysed interaction in seminar discussions. The participants of the discussions were mainly native speakers of English, with 30% of non-native speaker students; all were students of a business administration program at a British university. The class discussions were preceded by student presentations. During the seminars the teacher was present, but took a back seat and did not dominate the discussions. Thus, the patterns identified in the study reflected only the language

used by the learners. The results showed that the most common pattern was the IRE exchange (approximately 67% of all exchanges identified in the study). Below the IRE pattern is presented (Basturkmen 2002: 236).

Student 1 (Initiation, usually in the form of a question) – Presenter 1 (Response 1) – Presenter 2 (Response 2) – Student 1 (Evaluation).

Basturkmen (2002: 237, 238) claims that this pattern is an exchange of pre-existing information, without active construction of ideas. The other type of pattern identified in the study reflected more active involvement of students. It is the IRE / IR(E) pattern, which accounted for about 33% of all exchanges identified. The sequence of exchange is the following (Basturkmen 2002: 237, 238):

Student 1 (Initiation) – Student 2 (Response 1) – Student 1 (Evaluation of Response 1, showing dissatisfaction with Response 1 and initiating further talk) – Student 2 (Response to Student's 1 evaluation/initiation).

The researcher underlines the importance of the E/I move in the above-presented pattern. She claims that it "serves to drive the exchange further rather than terminate it" (Basturkmen 2002: 238) and allows learners to extend their talk beyond a simple question-answer sequence. Not only does it provide students with an opportunity to present ideas that they have a priori; it also encourages speakers to share their ideas with other discussion participants. Speakers modify their initial opinions and negotiate meaning, which consequently leads to the construction of a common version of knowledge. Basturkmen notices that the role of this move in discussion has not received due attention and emphasises its role in developing discussion skills in academic speaking.

3.4. The IDRF (Wegerif 1996)

A similar pattern is presented by Wegerif (1996), who examined the process of learners' interaction stimulated by the computer. The subjects of his observation were young teenagers (students of British schools) working with educational software. As a result of his study the IDRF pattern was identified. It stands for: computer initiation (I), student discussion (D), student response (R) and computer feedback (F). In this exchange, students are given time to think and generate ideas before the product of their cooperation is evaluated by the computer. It seems that this sequence of turns can be important especially in a foreign language setting, where learners may need more space to cooperate and prepare their version of common knowledge both in terms of language and content.

3.5. Student Critical Turns (Boyd and Rubin 2002)

Boyd and Rubin (2002: 495) say that "[s]tudents may ask procedural questions and be procedurally engaged, but they are rarely substantively engaged." Therefore in their study, they decided to create conditions that can encourage substantively engaged student talk. Their aim was to observe and analyse Student Critical Turns (SCTs), which in their opinion represent the quality student talk. Three criteria were used to establish SCTs: length and coherence of turns as well as speakers' substantive engagement. The criteria used to establish Student Critical Turns are presented below (Boyd and Rubin 2002: 504).

Length

A SCT must take at least ten seconds of uninterrupted talk.

Coherence

A SCT must build upon a previous utterance in a way that reflects the construction of meaning.

Substantive Engagement

A SCT must demonstrate at least one of the following three indicators of reciprocal interaction and negotiation:

1. Authentic questions;
2. Uptake on questions;
3. High-level evaluation of preceding utterances.

Boyd and Rubin (2002) analysed discourse of a small group of six L2 students, who participated in a six-week literature-based course. The methodology applied in the study analysed the relationship between classroom knowledge and classroom talk. First, the classroom talk was divided into topical episodes defined as "minimally terminable (i.e., semi-autonomous or relatively self-contained) thematic units" (Boyd and Rubin 2002: 504). Then, all SCTs and all turns of talk preceding them were coded in terms of participant role and communicative function. In SCTs five participant roles were identified: initiator, respondent, facilitator of interaction, facilitator of interpretation and evaluator. As regards communicative functions, the following six were identified: extending/elaborating one's own previous message, extensive responses (i.e. in a complete sentence or more), explaining, extending/elaborating a previous speaker's message, authentic questions and evaluating, i.e. challenging each other's ideas.

Facilitator of interpretation was the most common role taken by the students in SCTs. The percentages responding to each function were the following: facilitator of interpretation (61.5%), respondent (21.2%), initiator (9.6%) and evaluator (7.7%). Facilitators of interpretation were found to perform four different communicative functions: extending/elaborating one's previous message, extending/elaborating previous speakers' message, explaining and extensive response. In the majority of turns (37%), the learners extended or elaborated on their own earlier comment producing the SCT. On the basis of these results, Boyd and Rubin (2002: 511)

conclude "that the prototypical SCT in this data set was uttered by a student who was helping the class interpret an idea and was doing so by elaborating on one of his or her own earlier remarks." Thus, Boyd and Rubin (2002: 512) characterised SCT "as longer turns of talk in which the main participant role of the speaker is facilitating interpretation (62%), and the prevalent communicative function of the speaker is extending and elaborating on the speaker's own previous turn (37%)."

An analysis of the teacher talk and student talk identified in the study indicates certain differences. The most common participant role taken by both the teacher (40%) and students (52%) was facilitating interpretation, which involved restating/questioning what other speakers have said, relating topics to own experiences, comparing characters from the text and discussing the writer's style. This result shows that the teacher was not alone in making communication more effective; the students were also able to take responsibility for constructing understanding of ideas exchanged in the class discussion. They were active in facilitating interpretation; it seems that they listened attentively to one another and applied strategies that could assist their understanding of other learners' ideas. Both the students and the teacher initiated interaction; however, the teacher did it more frequently. The teacher also facilitated interaction more often, which means that he encouraged students to participate in discussion, ensuring that speakers stuck to the topic and all interlocutors were involved in interaction. Also communicative functions were different in the two groups. The students spent most time on extending and elaborating their own and other speakers' messages as well as editing the previous speaker's message. Whereas the teacher asked questions (both display and authentic) and encouraged the students to clarify their messages.

It seems that the results show a traditional division of classroom roles, i.e. the teacher organising discourse (therefore taking more turns) and learners accepting the teacher's facilitative role and working on their production. As mentioned before, it was the teacher who initiated most of the topical episodes and most frequently uttered the turn of talk immediately preceding the SCT. The learners needed support and scaffolding from the teacher. This was reflected in the frequency of the teacher talk, which constituted less than one third of the classroom talk. In turns immediately preceded a SCT, in about 80% of cases, the teacher took the role of facilitator of interpretation or interaction, asking questions and uttering clarification requests, whereas in the student talk immediately preceded a SCT, the preponderant role was facilitating interpretation through editing.

The researchers conclude that SCTs were evidence of co-constructed talk. The results indicated that most of the SCTs (77%) involved students responding, expanding and editing previous speakers' ideas, thus "contributed to a shared or co-constructed group discussion" (Boyd and Rubin 2002: 521). The other 23% constituted students' elaborating on their own previous utterances. Although these turns "might appear more narcissistic rather than dialogic" (Boyd and Rubin 2002: 521), the researchers agreed that also these turns were elements of co-constructed dialogue.

It is worth commenting on the nature of display questions asked by the teacher and their role in the construction of group discussion. The researchers noticed that display questions often drew on the previous student utterance, which led to a collective elaboration of an idea. Boyd and Rubin (2002: 523) noticed that "the series of display questions often culminated in a student launching himself/herself into a SCT" and that display questions were used by the teacher "not to cue recitation but rather to push students to expand thinking and talk." This shows that display questions, often considered an ineffective teaching strategy (e.g. Nystrand 1997), can motivate learners to co-construct classroom talk.

4. Classroom practices facilitating educated talk

4.1. Envisionment-building practices (Langer 1995)

This investigation is an example of a more extensive study. Langer (1986, 1987, 1990, 1995, cited in Applebee *et al.* 2003) was interested in how successful readers developed their understandings of literary and informational (expository) texts. The subjects were American high school students. She criticised previous conceptualisations of linguistic and cognitive aspects of the reading process for their misrepresentation of "the ever-changing nature of a reader's or writer's understanding of a text" (Applebee *et al.* 2003: 690). To describe the process of comprehending the text, Langer (in Applebee *et al.* 2003: 690) suggests the term "envisionment building" of "an evolving text world." The researcher found that the process of "envisionment building" of any text "was a mixture of understandings, questions, hypotheses, and connections to previous knowledge and experiences" (Applebee *et al.* 2003: 691). She observed that students' envisionment evolved; factors that influenced changes in learners' understanding were further reading, writing about the text or discussing the text.

In her next studies, Langer (2000, 2001, cited in Applebee *et al.* 2003) looked closer at the factors that could facilitate the process of envisionment building. In case studies the researcher examined 25 schools, including 44 English teachers in 88 classrooms, over a period of two years. Her findings emphasised the role of discussion-based activities and explicit teaching of strategies needed for effective participation in discussions in envisionment-building aspects of teaching. Langer concluded that it is crucial that teachers focus "on depth rather than breadth of knowledge" and use discussions "to develop depth and complexity of understanding" (Applebee *et al.* 2003: 691). Teachers should encourage students to look at texts from a number of perspectives, avoiding imposing on students one possible interpretation. As regards discussion-based activities, Langer emphasises that they should be used to develop students' understanding rather than to check what

students already know. Questions should be treated as an important part of the lesson; they should guide learners in the process of understanding new material and stimulate them to start discussions.

4.2. Open discussions (Applebee and his associates 2003)

The above-presented findings (Langer 2000, 2001, cited in Applebee *et al.* 2003) were confirmed in the next extensive study conducted by Applebee and his associates (2003), in which 974 American students attending middle and high schools were observed. In contrast to the studies discussed above, the researchers did not identify and analyse one technique facilitating quality talk about texts. The main aim of the study was to examine the interrelationships among various classroom practices reflecting the principles of dialogic approaches to instruction, such as envisionment building and high academic demands. The study also looked at the relationship between the above-mentioned variables and students' literacy performance (which was measured by means of reading tests and writing assignments). Questionnaires were administered to both teachers and students, asking teachers about classroom techniques and learners about their school achievement and the amount of homework given. Classroom discussions were analysed, with special focus put on questions asked by teachers and students as well as materials used. Additionally, students' literacy performance was measured.

It is important to explain that in this study open discussion was defined as an uninterrupted exchange of ideas among at least three speakers taking more than 30 seconds. The results showed that an average open discussion lasted 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time. Applebee and his associates (2003: 707) acknowledge that "[a]lthough the figure seems low, this is in part because 30 seconds is a considerable amount of time in the ordinary pace of classroom discourse." It is interesting to note that this criterion is similar to Boyd and Rubin's (2002) "student critical turns," defined as 10 seconds of uninterrupted talk with coherence and substantive engagement.

The study provides interesting results concerning questions asked by teachers. Approximately 19% of the teachers' questions were authentic questions, i.e. they did not seek a prespecified answer; whereas 31% of all the questions built on a previous comment, i.e. they involved uptake, building on a previous comment. The results showed that discussion-based teaching, along with high academic demands (e.g. in the form of homework assignments), was significantly related to student literacy performance across a diverse set of classrooms in the high school setting. Applebee *et al.* (2003: 722) also underline the role of the teacher, whose "spontaneous scaffolding or support for developing ideas that are generated during open discussions is a powerful tool for learning."

5. How to introduce and teach educated talk

The benefits of teaching students to use educated talk (e.g. Applebee *et al.* 2003) encourage teachers to develop this kind of discourse in their classrooms. The main principles on which educated talk is likely to develop are as follows:

- Establishing a culture of talk, a "collaborative space" (Vass *et al.* 2008, cited in Moate 2010). This involves giving students an ample opportunity to present their ideas (Wegerif *et al.* 2004; Mercer, Dawes 2008), compare them with those of other learners and construct together new understandings. In this atmosphere any decisions and conclusions are reached slowly. Both teachers and learners need time to prepare themselves and their setting to allow a new culture to develop.
- Commitment of both learners and teachers. Moate (2010: 42) explains this principle as being "committed to working together through a process to reach an intellectually-satisfying conclusion." The atmosphere of trust should be created to encourage all students to participate in discussions. It is important that all students' understandings are viewed as important contributions to classroom discussions.
- Transparency of information (Moate 2010). During discussions all participants should have access to information that is shared and which contributes to the joint construction of knowledge.
- Consideration given to each group member and his/her contribution so that in discussions all ideas are explored and challenged (Moate 2010). Every participant should feel free to explore ideas and justifications before final results are drawn.
- Joint ownership of the final results of the discussion, which means that all the participants should accept the product of their work (Moate 2010).

It is important to emphasise that although this kind of teaching encourages learners to participate in class discussions, active participation should not be viewed in the way the principles of Communicative Language Teaching suggest (Wallace 2005). Increasing learners' participation does not mean getting learners practise speaking for the sake of speaking, with stress put mainly on fluency. Speaking is a tool to express and share ideas before the joint construction of knowledge is achieved.

6. Conclusion and suggestions for future FL/L2 research

The studies discussed above indicate that the IRE is a common pattern in classroom discourse. It has been identified as a separate exchange or a component of a more extensive exchange in both teacher-student and student-student interaction. It seems that although the IRE alone does not provoke active construction of ideas,

it does help to organise and reinforce the pre-existing ideas. The finding that the IRE exchange was the most frequent pattern in the student discourse raises the question why also in the student talk the IRE pattern was the most common. Is this the result of learners imitating the teacher-student talk or does it indicate the usefulness of the IRE pattern in both teacher-student and student-student talk? It seems that future studies can investigate these questions.

More attention is needed to examine the E/I more (i.e. follow-up as initiation), identified by Basturkmen (2002), in academic speaking. It can be interesting to look at the role of this move in academic discussions, particularly to investigate how it contributes to the exchange of ideas and mutual construction of knowledge.

It can be worthwhile to examine the role of the IDRF pattern (Wegerif 1996) in computer-based activities conducted in a foreign language context. The role of a foreign language in learners' cooperation can be investigated; in other words, we could explore the nature of learning a foreign language in order to complete the task, thereby the relationship between the construction of knowledge and the language used in a group work task.

The study into Student Critical Turns (Boyd and Rubin 2002) encourages further investigation. By way of repetition, SCTs constituted 9% of all student turns of talk and approximately one third of all longer turns. One may wonder to what extent this amount of students' active participation and substantive engagement in the classroom discourse contributed to their learning of the subject knowledge (i.e. comprehension of texts that were discussed in class). The study investigated a small group of intermediate primary school L2 students and focused on literature-based lessons. It would be interesting to investigate the role of SCTs in other educational contexts, especially in classes in which learners read texts to learn the subject knowledge.

The studies reviewed above examine the nature of display questions asked by the teacher and learners. Boyd and Rubin (2002) show that contrary to the earlier research (e.g. Nystrand 1997) display questions can stimulate learners to co-construct classroom talk. More research is needed to explore the role of display questions in mutually constructed discourse as well as co-constructed knowledge and understanding.

The studies point to a number of factors that prove successful in facilitating educated talk. The results of the research emphasise the importance of stimulating learners to produce "quality" ideas, which can reflect "quality" critical thinking. The factors that seemed to encourage students to produce "quality" ideas are:

- Ensuring the authenticity of discussion, as demonstrated in the negative follow-up in the IREI pattern (Hoey 1991) and the E/I move (Basturkmen 2002); in both cases learners disagreed with their interlocutors, which encourages further exchange.
- Providing students with the material to talk about, e.g. texts (as shown by Boyd and Rubin 2002).

– Giving students an appropriate amount of time to generate ideas and plan their talk (as demonstrated by Wegerif 1996).

Future research could focus on further investigation of the relationship between "quality" thinking and educated talk.

The studies reviewed in the article draw on a traditional conceptualisation of communication based on an encoding-decoding model. What is neglected in this research perspective is the role of language in how learners perform language activities. The role of language as cognitive activity has been investigated within Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory. For example, Brooks and Donato (1994: 264) emphasise that "the focus of attention in a Vygotskian analysis is on interpreting how speaking creates a shared social reality and maintains that individuals speak to plan and carry out task-relevant actions rather than encode and decode in order to speak." Thus, in their study the researchers looked at three functions of speaking: speaking as object regulation, speaking as shared orientation and speaking as goal formation. The researchers believe that this approach enabled them to investigate how students co-construct and make sense of their own interactions "in respect to the task and each other" (Brooks and Donato 1994: 266) and consequently to look closer at the relationship between speaking and thinking as factors intertwining in the activity. It seems that future studies should combine both approaches, i.e. that based on an encoding-decoding model and the one influenced by Vygotskian theory. This would create an opportunity to investigate the language itself and its role in both cognitive and social processes in the classroom.

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